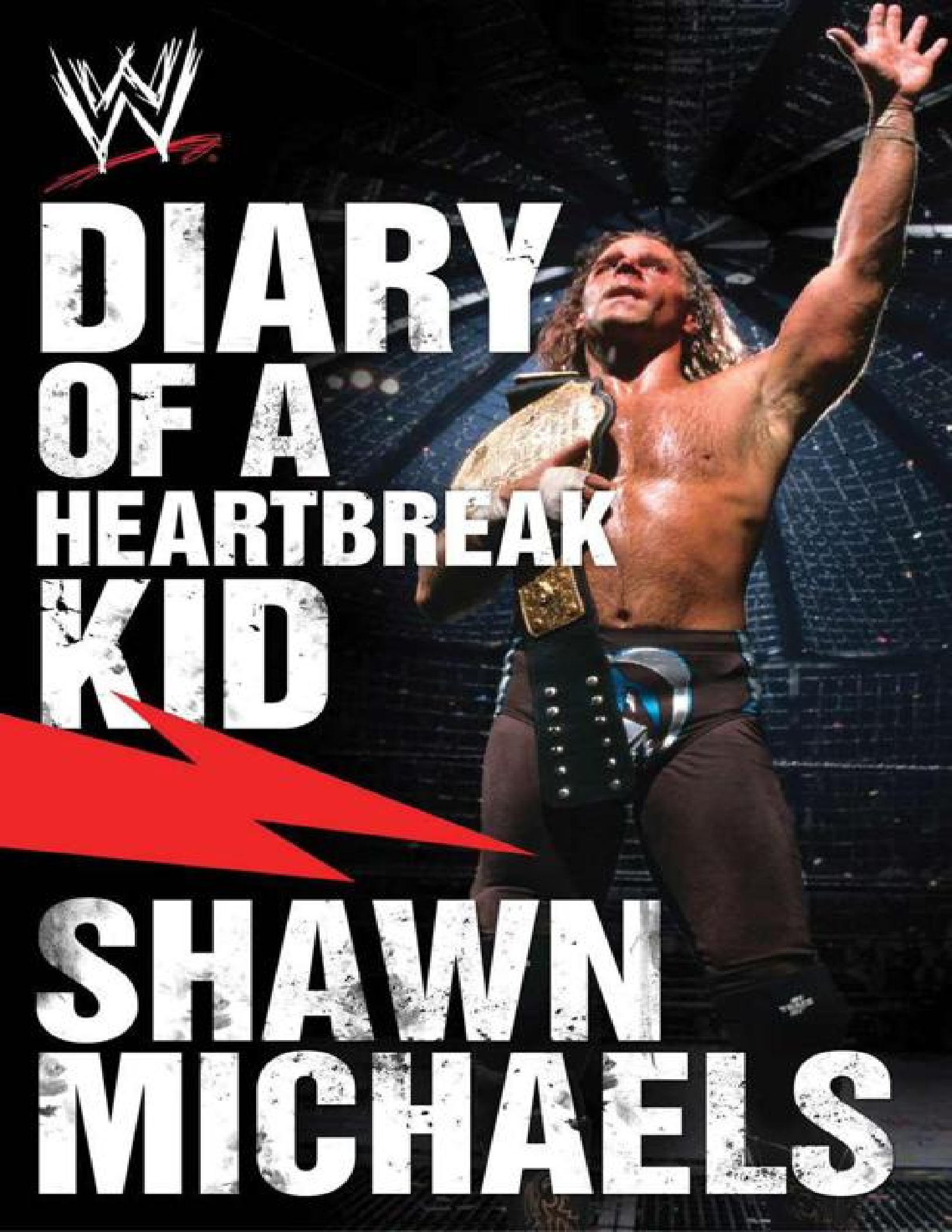

DIARY OF A HEARTBREAK KID

SHAWN MICHAELS

DIARY OF A HEARTBREAK KID

DIARY OF A HEARTBREAK KID

Craig Tello

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INTRODUCTION

It was uncomfortably silent when Shawn Michaels warily toed the aisle for the first time in his career on October 16, 1984. In an undersize arena that's possibly no longer standing in Texas today, a Lake Charles crowd devoid of reaction met Michaels, a sandy-haired youth with a pure and charming smile, as he crossed through the ring ropes.

More than two decades later, an attending audience that was exponentially larger—plus a worldwide viewership watching from home—sat in respectful awe when HBK, a veritable ring marvel, was inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame on April 2, 2011.

Richly inspired by his athleticism, showmanship and expressions of genuine heart, the WWE Universe embraced the Showstopper's high honor as he was rightly exalted for performing like no one else in all of sports entertainment.

In one night, his legendary ladder top leap, fulfilled boyhood dream and repeated masterful dances on the Grandest Stage of Them All were celebrated in grandeur—on the eve of *WrestleMania XXVII,* appropriately enough.

Michaels's squared circle career was born just months before Vince McMahon hatched *WrestleMania*—two phenomena that evolved in parallel until Michaels seized the event as his personal stage for excellence. Christened "Mr. *WrestleMania*" after consistently unforgettable

performances, HBK completed his grandest ambition at the Show of Shows, but this time there was no championship, no rivalry, no battleground.

This time, it was simply a guaranteed glory that Michaels indisputably earned over the course of a twenty-six-year career: entry into the WWE Hall of Fame.

PROLOGUE: A Showstopper Is Born

1

BUILT BY ASSOCIATION

All it took was the initial exposure to Joe Blanchard's Southwest Championship Wrestling in the HemisFair Arena to convince Shawn

Michaels. Raucously cheering for the likes of Bruiser Bob Sweetan, Michaels, a self-admittedly shy youth, conjured a dream to chase and a passion to fulfill from the sound of the very first ring bell.

Michaels was introduced to and trained by Jose Lothario, and his squared circle apprenticeship earned him a spot on the roster of the American Wrestling Association (AWA). Here Shawn was first paired up with an equally energetic competitor with a comparably frenetic ring style: Marty Jannetty. As the Midnight Rockers, the young tag team kicked off their careers, ascended their division ranks, captured the AWA World Tag Team Championship and readjusted their aspirations to a larger pond with much bigger fish in WWE.

2

ROCKIN' OUT, ROCKIN' IN

Following an invitation by WWE officials, Shawn Michaels and Marty Jannetty landed in June 1987 on the doorstep of Vince McMahon's vastly growing franchise, where the pair clashed with Jose Estrada and Jimmy Jack Funk in their first-ever WWE match. Despite an unsavory first impression among fellow Superstars that led to the dismissal of Jannetty and Michaels, the revitalized, less rebellious Rockers were welcomed back to WWE on July 7, 1988.

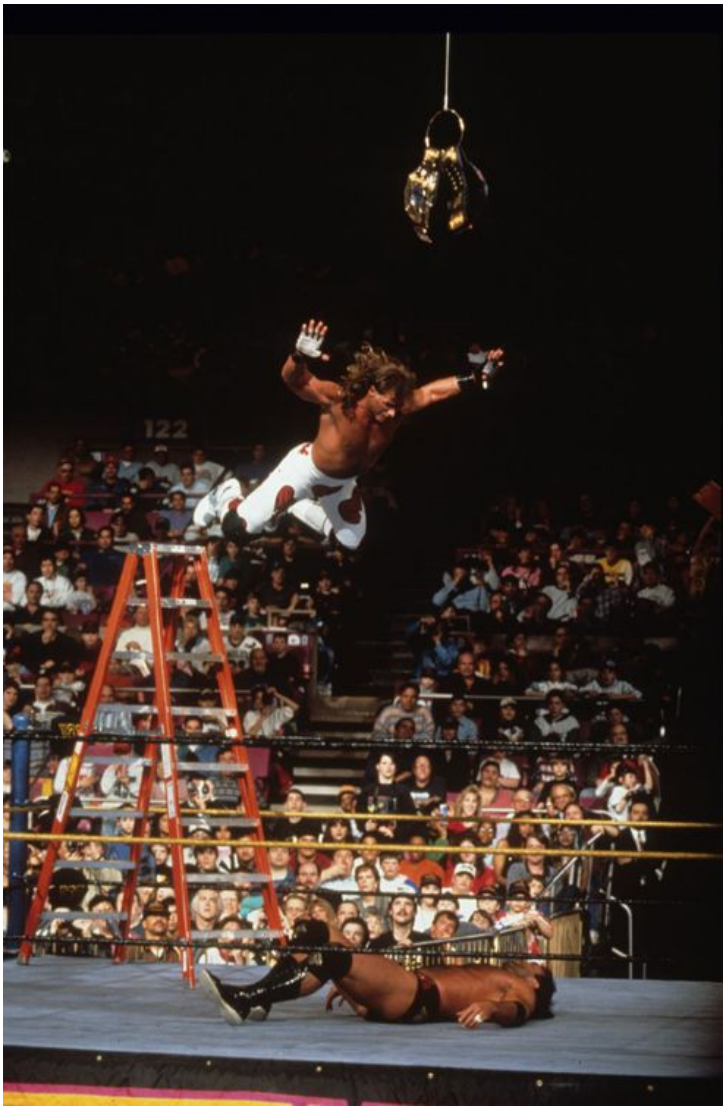
The rugged road to the truest proving ground in sports entertainment would pay off in spades as The Rockers—with their neon fringe and heavily teased hair tresses—propelled themselves upward to be among the most prolific tag team specialists in WWE history.

3

A REAL GLASS ACT

Ironically similar to a crack in a glass windshield, a trivial incident between Shawn Michaels and Marty Jannetty led to a much more severe fracture during a visit to Brutus "The Barber" Beefcake's *Barber Shop* in late 1991. Michaels's ego had grown too large for The Rockers, and Shawn initiated his solo career in a most despicable fashion: "accidentally" superkicking his benevolent tag partner and then projecting Jannetty through a pane of glass.

Representative of their shattered union, the shards of the window lay strewn about the carpet of Beefcake's set and around Michaels's betrayed former friend. With a proud collar pop of his leather bomber jacket, The Heartbreak Kid—as "Mr. Perfect" Curt Hennig later dubbed Michaels while in a commentating role—was introduced to the world.



4

“CLIMB” DOES PAY

However contemptible his actions on *Barber Shop,* the split of The Rockers was the first step up a very tall ladder for Shawn Michaels. After capturing the Intercontinental Championship from the British Bulldog in 1992, The

Heartbreak Kid reigned during his singles career and only continued his ascent upward . . . until he leaped from that ladder's peak at *WrestleMania X*.

Michaels met Razor Ramon in Madison Square Garden that night for the Intercontinental title in a revolutionary Ladder match that many have referred to as one of the best bouts in *WrestleMania* history. Using the lofty aluminum apparatus to uniquely batter each other, HBK and Ramon commanded the attention of the WWE Universe. Time slowed in New York City and the show came to a breath-baiting halt when Michaels soared from the peak of the ladder on to his rival, forging a quintessential *'Mania* moment and amassing early equity for his future Mr. *WrestleMania* namesake.

5

CLING OF THE RING

Reviled yet recognized by the WWE Universe as an exceptional performer, Shawn Michaels entered the 1995 *Royal Rumble* with his usual bravado and detestable swagger. The "Sexy Boy"/"Boy Toy" kicked off the thirty-man clash as the first entrant beside the second competitor, the British Bulldog. More than an hour later, the same two Superstars looked across the ring to see the foe with whom they started the match. That is, until Bulldog

powered HBK over the top rope, seemingly securing his WWE title opportunity at *WrestleMania*.

However, leveraging both the match rules and the ring ropes, The Heartbreak Kid precariously dangled above the arena floor—and instant defeat—with only one boot touching. As "Rule Britannia" signaled Davey Boy Smith's supposed triumph, Shawn steadied his balance, slipped back into the ring and ambushed the swindled Bulldog, who was knocked from his mounted celebratory position on the middle rope to the outside.

Michaels made history with his start-to-finish feat, and his *Rumble* accomplishment situated him in the main event of *WrestleMania XI* against his former best friend and bodyguard, WWE Champion Diesel. Though unsuccessful against "Big Daddy Cool" on the Grandest Stage of Them All, The Heartbreak Kid rebounded with a second, successive *Rumble* victory in 1996—the year in which Michaels would simply not be denied.

6

BOYHOOD DREAMER

The WWE Universe has often heard the impassioned echo of the McMahon-uttered statement "The boyhood dream has come true" in the most definitive *WrestleMania* retrospectives. This declaration aptly encapsulates the emotions fueling Shawn Michaels as he looked down at the reflection of his own tear-swelled face in the luster of the WWE Championship at *WrestleMania XII*.

The long-awaited sixty-minute clash between Michaels and Bret "Hit Man" Hart culminated in overtime with dual doses of Sweet Chin Music to

the defending WWE Champion. After more than an hour of alluring competition between sports entertainment's finest technicians, The Heartbreak Kid met his destiny and clutched the rich prize he'd sought for so long, a gleaming manifestation of the dream that had finally been fulfilled.

7

LEADING THE NEW GENERATION

Together with the leather chaps and mirrored ornamentation of his flashy ring garb, the WWE title around his waist completed Shawn Michaels's signature style as the leader of WWE's "New Generation."

The Heartbreak Kid's career continued to flourish with successes against a bevy of challengers, including Sycho Sid, Vader and Mankind. But the taxing confrontations associated with the role of WWE's premier Superstar wore

heavily on Michaels's body, especially given the nature of his famously high-risk techniques.

Though very much a "Superman" of the ring, the WWE Champion displayed a much more deeply human side to the WWE Universe when he revealed he'd lost his smile. Forced to repair his deteriorating knee, Michaels relinquished his prized WWE title and went on a mission to both heal and retrieve his absent grin, making a permanent connection with WWE fans in the process.

8

BREAK IT DOWN AND OUT

The Showstopper ultimately located his smile by the end of 1997 . . . at the expense of each and every authority figure (and then some) in WWE. With the formation of D-Generation X, Shawn Michaels and his best friend,

Triple H, revolutionized sports entertainment with their edgy, unruly and unrelenting exploits and played a critical part in the onset of The Attitude Era, as well as WWE's Monday Night Wars victory over WCW.

Leaving an indelible neon-green mark on WWE, DX said and did whatever they wanted to whomever they wanted, defying everyone from WWE officials to revered Superstars like Bret Hart. As the WWE Universe quickly grew to understand, HBK and The Game had two words for anyone who stood against them or any future iterations of the rebel faction—though none were more potent D-Generates than its core members.

A proud D-Generate marching into *WrestleMania XIV,* the Showstopper would compete in his last match for four years against Stone Cold Steve Austin. With Triple H by his side, Michaels lost the bout, the WWE title and the spotlight in a single night, which ended with a knockout punch from celebrity guest Mike Tyson.

9

STRONG, COURAGEOUS, VICTORIOUS

He left the ring with Triple H beside him, but when Shawn Michaels returned to action in 2002, his best friend was now his greatest nemesis. A D-Generate converted into a pure family man, HBK came back to WWE

and proved that when it comes to the squared circle, he is above all a peerless performer.

With biblical passages encouraging him to "be strong and courageous," Michaels reemerged and clashed with The Game at *SummerSlam*. Their unfinished business carried into *Survivor Series* in Madison Square Garden for the debut of the Elimination Chamber, years after the back surgery that doctors argued would preclude Michaels from ring action forever.

In New York City's famous arena, HBK conquered five other Superstars—among them Triple H and Chris Jericho—to capture the World Heavyweight Championship and utter a truly remarkable statement: The Showstopper was back.

10

MR. *WRESTLEMANIA*

Compensating for time lost while away from the stage he was born to walk, Shawn Michaels quickly reestablished himself as the Main Event, particularly when the setting happened to be the Show of Shows.

After his return in 2002, HBK continued to set the standard when it came to competing at *WrestleMania.* Chris Jericho. Kurt Angle. John Cena. Even Mr. McMahon: Against some of WWE's greatest names, even in instances of defeat, Michaels's consistent level of performance at the Biggest Spectacle of All has been rivaled only by the parallel progression of Undertaker's flawless

WrestleMania winning streak. This, perhaps, is why the Showstopper versus the Phenom was an event that not even divine intervention could deter.

11

THE SHOW STOPS

Once and again a second time, Shawn Michaels challenged Undertaker on the Grandest Stage of Them All in clashes for much more than any championship at *WrestleMania*s *XXV* and *XXVI*. With his honor, his legacy and, ultimately, his career in the balance, the Showstopper sought to bring down the Dead Man and his mythic streak. The result: two matches that no one in the WWE Universe—Superstar or spectator—will ever forget and, moreover, a somber yet dignified end to Shawn Michaels's prolific career.

In Phoenix on March 28, 2010, the Show was officially stopped. But this would be no epitaph. Rather, despite the loss to Undertaker, HBK stood rapt by the adulation of the 72,000 present in the stadium and the millions watching worldwide.

Michaels's career was further celebrated on a poignant edition of *Monday Night Raw* just twenty-four hours after his final match at *WrestleMania*. His emotions slightly obscured beneath the brim of his cowboy hat, the proud San Antonian Showstopper stepped away from what he'd always done best with a proud, contented wave.

One year later, the celebration of a brilliant career brings Mr. *WrestleMania* back to WWE on a suitably radiant weekend. For all the championships he's chased and performances he's sought to exceed at the Show of Shows, this *WrestleMania* brings with it the greatest honor Shawn Michaels could ever envision, as he is inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame.

DAY ONE: Thursday, March 31, 2011

12

THE ARRIVAL, 4:43 p.m.

The retired Showstopper flies again, this time arriving in Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport mere miles away from the sites of a momentous *WrestleMania* weekend. Joined by his family, the WWE Hall of Fame–bound Texan disembarks beside his wife, Rebecca, the pair corralling two children following a flight from San Antonio. The HB Clan waits for its patriarch outside the airport while Shawn rounds up the family's ride to downtown and stumbles into the Kliq, resurrected: droves of HBK supporters in shirts from all eras looking to meet and congratulate Michaels.

Posters, magazines, zebra-striped Heartbreak Kid driving caps from 1995. The usual assortment, one would suppose. A life-size cardboard cutout of a DX-shirted Showstopper, however, is the most unexpected artifact in the middle of a bustling airport terminal.

"He signed my hand!" one youth excitedly yelps while clinging to his mom. This small hand is among easily a hundred autographed objects in a span of just several minutes.

Sharpies exhausted, HBK makes his departure to rejoin his family and head to their hotel.

"This is the most work I've done all day. It's too much," jokes a quite relaxed Michaels.

13

HEADS UP, 5:31 p.m.

From “The Boy Toy” to a crotch-chopping D-Generate to onetime tag partner of the “Good Lord” Himself, Shawn Michaels has played many roles in his WWE career. One year after retiring from the ring, HBK still wears many hats, but most notably that of husband and father.

When Michaels and his family pull up to their destination, his son, Cameron, is still carrying a pair of heroic novelties: Batman backpack and a glistening World Heavyweight Championship that traveled across the country in an airplane overhead bin. HBK’s younger child, Cheyenne—in

little lady cowgirl boots, white with pink trim—is just as patient as her older brother while their legendary dad coordinates his extended weekend in a hotel meeting room.

14

SUCCESS BAGGAGE, 5:48 p.m.

After receiving his official schedule for his four-day *WrestleMania* week ahead, Shawn experiences a close encounter with WWE Hall of Famers Gerald Brisco and Pat Patterson, two ring legends—Patterson especially—who were integral motivators for Michaels in his earliest years. Warm congratulatory praise is received with sheer humility by the Showstopper, who occasionally peeks around to ensure that the younger members of his clan haven't strayed out of sight.

The longtime mentors turned friends say good-bye for now, and Shawn reroutes his attention to wrangling the family and their baggage. Amid a uniform pile of standard black luggage rests one noticeable camo-colored knapsack, representative of Michaels's very passionate outdoor interests. The pushcart is kicked forth and the family sets off toward their weekend domicile.

15

HEARTBREAK KIDS, 7:16 p.m.

Fifteen years ago today, Shawn Michaels climbed into the ring to live a boyhood dream by capturing the WWE Championship at *WrestleMania XII*. Flash-forward to the present day, and opposing HBK in the squared circle are two rambunctious youths dying to expend their lingering energies. It's hard to tell which March 31 match might mean more to the Showstopper.

"Over the last year, I've had the opportunity to look back on everything, the whole body," Shawn reveals. "And what I think about most is being that nineteen-year-old kid who wanted to be a wrestler. Twenty-six years later,

I'm playing with my kids in the ring. It's really gone full circle and then some."

In an empty ring set up for the nearby *WrestleMania Axxess* festivities, a handicap bout pits Michaels against his own children—a joust typically contested in the pool of their San Antonio home. HBK toggles between didactic, move-by-move training and administering tickles to both Cheyenne and Cameron, whose maneuver mimicry is "alarmingly Showstopper."

After several quick tags by the younger competitors, sunset flips, middle-rope clotheslines, Boston crabs and belly flops, the match seems to end indecisively, though it seems the biggest winner might be vigilant mom Rebecca, who watches contentedly at ringside.

16

DAY TO REMEMBER, 7:39 p.m.

As Shawn points out, the relevance of this date extends past his great accomplishments inside the squared circle. On March 31, 1999, Michaels married his wife in a Las Vegas ceremony seen only by a costumed Elvis. The relevance of the day is not lost on Mr. *WrestleMania*.

"Today is also my twelfth wedding anniversary," Michaels explains. "Obviously the significance of my wedding anniversary, playing with my kids, going into the WWE Hall of Fame on this day coinciding with my first

WWE Championship—it's pretty neat. That's how my whole career has gone."

He poignantly continues: "I oftentimes sit there and wonder if it's just a storybook to me or a storybook to everybody—and it is."

Citing a San Antonio location known as The Junction as his onetime fantasy setting for competition, HBK describes his humble mission as a teenaged dreamer.

"The place where they wrestled when I was growing up was The Junction down on Blanco Road. It held twenty-five people," he says. "To be going into the Hall of Fame and to have had my last match in front of almost seventy-five thousand people, and in front of [my family] . . . all the words, all the clichés; nothing seems to do it justice."

At the end of a surprisingly fast day, Michaels takes a glance into his immediate future, when he'll take a stage during *WrestleMania* weekend that will, for once, not have four corners. Remarkably, rather than focus on the strange notion that Mr. *WrestleMania* will not perform at the Show of Shows, HBK offers his genuine perspective, dressed with his signature levity.

"I enjoy the excitement without some of the anxiety and the stress that I used to have," Michaels divulges. "I'm still wondering what the heck it is that I'm going to say [on Saturday]. But I feel like even if I bomb overwhelmingly, I've still got twenty-six years of work to fall back on."

DAY TWO: Friday, April 1, 2011

17

MEDIA MORNING, 8:16 a.m.

A sleek, sunray-soaked Excursion transports the Showstopper from his hotel to the Georgia Dome at the city's World Congress Center for some media intermingling. Joined by fellow Hall of Fame inductee Sunny as well as Wade Barrett, Sheamus, Christian and others, Shawn barely settles in before he's herded off to conduct a live interview with local TV network WXIA.

Engulfed by visual memories of so many *WrestleMania*s gone by—Caesars Palace in 1993, SkyDome in 1990—Michaels relies on his trademark charisma (arguably an admiral's rank to that of the "captain" mere yards

away) to make the early-morning meet-and-greet with the rapt reporter seem more like banter between reacquainted friends.

Referring to the new, HBK-inspired attraction at *WrestleMania Axxess*, HBK boasts facetiously before signing off from the prefestivity *Axxess* booth. "You have to understand, I've got my own section," he lightheartedly states. "You wear enough silly stuff, you get your own wing."

18

“NOW IT’S STARTING,” 8:26 a.m.

Shawn continues several paces away from the local Atlanta reporter toward a gaggle of journalists and media from around the globe, including Poland, France and the United Kingdom. He passes by relics like Andre the Giant’s suit and a framed *WrestleMania VIII* program, likely revisiting some very special moments in his twenty-six-year career. Emotions percolate and stir a genuine feeling for responses to countless variations of questions from interviewers, many of whom expose their WWE fanhood following their Q&As.

Before one energetic media member produces a posed photo with the Showstopper from the previous year's *WrestleMania,* the Rosetta stone–less Texan does his best to recite a German phrase, "*Jetzt gehts los*" ("Now it's starting"), for those watching in Deutschland.

Shawn shifts from network to radio to print journalist, landing on a suitably named press marker for the Chinese media in attendance. HBTV inquires about HBK's retirement and career highlights, segueing into WWE's marquee event this Sunday.

After some parley, Mr. *WrestleMania* divulges his predictions for the main event match winners on the Grandest Stage of Them All: World Heavyweight Champion Edge, John Cena and—perhaps the most difficult call for him to make—Undertaker. If Michaels is correct in his final prophecy, then his best friend will have fallen to the Phenom in less than a handful of days at *WrestleMania*.

19

LIVE ON THE “HAIR,” 9:59 a.m.

As part of the media frenzy, the Showstopper checks in with an Atlanta FM rock station whose radio DJ whipping boy takes his WWE fandom to an extreme, asking Superstars to buzz off sections of his short, strawberry-blond hair and sign their names in the freshly manicured bald area. At the conclusion of his on-air discourse with a panel of radio hosts, HBK happily obliges and adds his three iconic initials to the sophomoric kidder’s scalp.

20

CLOTHES MAKE THE MAIN EVENT, 10:28 a.m.

Even in retirement, Shawn Michaels is recognized as a pillar of *WrestleMania*'s grandeur, which is exactly what makes the Mr. *WrestleMania* attraction a requisite feature at *Axxess*.

Long before the doors of the venue are opened to the WWE Universe, the very soon-to-be Hall of Famer approaches a rotating platform celebrating the Showstopper's most unique—memorable, HBK admits, for better or worse—attire.

"[Years ago,] I knew I wanted to wear the biker hat," Shawn confirms, peering at an outfit he brazenly wore in the mid-1990s. "It was sort of 'Village People dropout,' but you just knew that was going to get people to notice and hate me, which it did, I think."

The cap, along with motorcycle boots and variations of his leather jacket, were the only salvaged articles of clothing from a post–Rockers marketing pitch to have Michaels compete as "the Idol."

"I liked the look but couldn't stand the name," he candidly details. "I hated the idea of being typecast or set into a mold. I wanted to be Shawn Michaels. I was given advice once by Roddy Piper, who said, 'Don't ever stop being who you are.' "

Taking this sound wisdom from a veritable entertainment legend, Michaels cultivated an unparalleled career, simply based on being himself. He fulfilled his inner cowboy by way of elaborately decorated chaps that would evolve into the ring gear dreamed up by his wife and worn by Shawn throughout the final years of his WWE career—all in hues that would be associated with HBK for years to come: black, red and white . . . with the occasional neon green.

21

BREAKING DX DOWN, 10:34 a.m.

Betwixt the main events and the iconic performances is D-Generation X, leaving an indelible, lime-hued ooze in Michaels's legendary path. Navigating his own career via *WrestleMania Axxess,* Shawn breaks it down again, identifying the personal origin of the two-lettered revolution that altered WWE and sports entertainment forever: DX.

"In the beginning, it was an outlet for a behavioral pattern that wasn't always positive," Michaels acknowledges. "Later on, it was just absolute fun

to do. It was a chance for Hunter [Triple H] and me to be who we are in the locker room. Neither one of us are really serious the majority of the time."

As the two core members of DX, HBK and Triple H introduced a more mature level of high jinks in WWE that spat in the face of authority and dared those in power to stop their unruly and often lewd shenanigans. After the Showstopper's departure from the ring, DX continued its "d-evolution" and rested until Michaels's return. Then in 2006, the band was back together when The Game and the Showstopper rekindled their dominance as the defiant duo in WWE . . . with just a subtle difference, according to HBK.

"We were no longer young and hip rabble-rousers. We were two guys that were older, that were dads. That's why we started to do more self-deprecating humor," he explains. "Early DX was making fun of everybody else, and a lot of the 'second' DX was us making fun of me and the attempts at maturity in my life."

"It was not what the first [DX] was," HBK admits, "but you can absolutely never do another 'first' anything. Still, I think it was a good time."

22

GO FIGURE, 11:05 a.m.

Although he's displaying more restraint than a sticky-faced little boy with his face pressed against the window of a toy store, Shawn Michaels's excitement is evident as he gets in tight and close for a sufficient glimpse of Mattel's masterpiece-like HBK action figure. The miniature plastic replica of Michaels's *WrestleMania XXV* ring gear is an appropriate addition to the world champion toymaker's Defining Moments line of WWE products. Protected like a museum relic, as priceless as the moment it represents, the

glass-encased toy substantially surpasses the detail and realism of his first-ever action figure from decades ago.

"There are a number of pivotal moments in one's career," Michaels says. "Your first title, your first check, your first Pay-Per-View. Getting your first doll—of course, they're *action figures* now—was always big," he adds, describing the hard plastic, spring-loaded toy of himself from 1991, when he was a member of The Rockers. "That's when you feel like you've made it."

According to the Showstopper, his mom's collection includes one of almost every Shawn Michaels figure, which his children always want to see. He admits that when it comes to Cameron's and Cheyenne's own collections, Mr. *WrestleMania* doesn't always come out on top.

"Daddy gets to win when it's my daughter; I'm defended to the hilt," HBK says. "When it's my son, he just wants to beat me up. [Cameron's] at the 'throwing me under the bus' stage . . . but every now and then, when someone asks him who's his favorite, he has very secretly said, 'My daddy's one of the greatest that ever wrestled.' "

23

MUSIC TO HIS EARS, 11:48 a.m.

When *WrestleMania* comes to town, so do the revered names of sports entertainment's present as well as those from its most distinguished past. Enter Jimmy Hart.

In a touching encounter, the Mouth of the South showers the Showstopper with praise and congratulations on his impending induction into the WWE Hall of Fame, alongside the likes of Hart himself. Sans signature megaphone, the sunglassed managerial genius describes his elation

for Shawn's massive moment on Saturday, especially since it was Hart's own music that accompanied HBK for his entire WWE singles career.

Shawn respectfully absorbs the flattery and recalls his utter fright the day he learned it would be his voice laid throughout the track of his camp-gone-epic entrance music.

"We went into the studio, knocked it out and even did the backup, *SEXAY BOY*! " recollects a high-pitched Hart, who both wrote and composed Michaels's theme song. "I'm telling you, when he gets inducted, it'll be like me getting inducted again."

It won't be only Jimmy who reacts with such enthusiasm on Saturday. Despite the lyrics that Shawn and his famed career have certainly outgrown, the familiar sound of the Showstopper's tune will signal an unrivaled roar. It's a tune the WWE Universe has learned to love—some are even guilty of singing it solo when no one's looking. It's the tune that's now as iconic as its associated performer, the star of the 2011 WWE Hall of Fame class.

24

PARENTAL CONTROL, 5:12 p.m.

"Somebody tell him he's not funny!" exclaims the salt-and-pepper-haired woman with a broad, beaming smile. Behind her is a gentleman who looks strikingly similar to the Showstopper, the Main Event. There's a reason for the resemblance: they're the parents of the incomparable Shawn Michaels.

HBK is joined today by his closest family, including his parents, Rebecca, Cameron, Cheyenne and more. Hugs abound, and booming laughter suggests that this impromptu reunion may have been long overdue. It's clear that their presence enlivens the Showstopper, and on this meaningful

weekend of friends and family, the main event is their proudest moment shared.

25

LIGHT IN THE DARK, 6:07 p.m.

Naturally, the Showstopper is pulled away from his family moment for his scheduled meeting with WWE producers for on-camera interviews. It's a discussion of two of the ring's most celebrated names: "The Million-Dollar Man" Ted DiBiase and Stone Cold Steve Austin—both extremely relevant pieces in HBK's career.

All mic'd up, Shawn relives his pre-Showstopper days in Mid-South Wrestling beside DiBiase, then segues into The Attitude Era's peak with Stone Cold—who ended HBK's career the first time around in their WWE

title match at *WrestleMania XIV*—behind the wheel. He cites his "real-life issues" with WWE and with himself in the late 1990s, then moves into discussions of shared faith with DiBiase.

The honest discourse concludes with Michaels in a carefully lit seat, offering only a brief moment of silence before HBK cuts in with a line that draws chuckles from all within earshot.

"I want to get my ring so bad," he exclaims. "It's the only reason I came."

26

A MATTER OF FAITH, 7:02 p.m.

In 2002, when Shawn Michaels returned to the squared circle, The Heartbreak Kid had clearly grown into a much respected man. Michaels would attribute his metamorphosis to his soul mate, Rebecca, but beneath their bond lay thick roots of faith: the same wielded by fellow WWE Hall of Famer Ted DiBiase, as HBK described moments earlier.

"[My faith] gave me hope," HBK asserts, evaluating a past ridden with behavior that was harmful to himself and those closest to the squared circle champion. "The idea that I survived all of that was a gift. It felt like a second

chance, a new opportunity to make amends at the very least for some of the things I did in the past."

Shawn cleansed his spirit by immersing himself in sound relationships with the woman he loved, with his children and with God. While he once used fame and other artificial, hollow crutches to find gratification, Michaels now finds fulfillment in the preservation and progression of his faith-grounded bonds. Flying elbows, fisticuffs, Sweet Chin Music—no other weapon in Michaels's arsenal has proved to be as potent as his faith upon his WWE return almost nine years ago.

"I just wanted to bring resolution to whatever conflict or disagreement was out there," he adds. "[Faith] brought a peace and a joy that I didn't have before."

27

GOING UP, 7:07 p.m.

As he quickly heads up to his suite before an informal cocktail party for all WWE Hall of Fame Class of 2011 inductees, HBK's elevator ascent is halted between the lower level and the top floor. In strolls a candid Pat Patterson, who selects his floor, greets the Showstopper—but then threatens to press all the number-emblazoned buttons, just because he can.

The wildly laughing first-ever Intercontinental Champion is immediately seized by Shawn until a "ding"—almost a third of a ring bell—breaks the

hold, and the mentor and mentee say good night, twenty-four hours before Michaels joins his longtime teacher in the Hall of Fame.

28

HEARTBREAK HOTEL, 7:10 p.m.

"You look great," Shawn says, as the red door of his hotel suite swings open to reveal his gorgeous wife of twelve years and one day.

Serenity permeates the air of the multiroom spread, currently child-free. The Heartbreak Kid gets a download on any family transpirings missed while keeping up with his schedule. Rebecca finds relief from the slew of animated kids movies in her Hall of Fame–bound husband on the eve of his ceremonious induction. However brief, their interaction is sustaining in a

turbulently enjoyable weekend back in the WWE spotlight. Mutual teasing turns into serious discussion about plans for what remains of the evening.

"The kids . . . the in-laws . . . my text message . . . the e-mails . . . T-shirt."

Their words waft in between subtle glances that suggest a stronger connection than they'll let on. With no ground left to cover and the time evaporating, Shawn must exit again, but only temporarily.

Then, before vanishing out toward the hall and the rest of the universe, The Heartbreak Kid contests his widely used namesake by taking one step in and connecting lips with his bride. His anxiety is null, and the immensity of tomorrow night suddenly seems far less overwhelming. The WWE Hall of Fame awaits. It can only get better.

DAY THREE: Saturday, April 2, 2011

29

HIGHWAY TO HALL, 9:52 a.m.

On October 16, 1984, Shawn Michaels could never have foreseen this forty-five-year-old version of himself sitting on a charter bus on the morning of his WWE Hall of Fame induction. With two children sleeping heavily in bed upon his departure, HBK is still busy minded on his journey to *WrestleMania Axxess*. For any man, let alone a Showstopper, it would be a lofty challenge to compact twenty-six years into the mere minutes he will have this evening during his induction speech. And as he continues to state

in various conversations, he still isn't quite sure exactly what he is going to say tonight.

30

MAKING HIMSELF *AXXESS*-IBLE, 10:19 a.m.

Roughly fifteen minutes away from the hotel containing the most important people in his life, HBK arrives at *WrestleMania Axxess,* passes through the building's halls, effortlessly projects a crumpled napkin into a trash can (a perfect shot), then moves toward the entrance stage for a Q&A session.

The booming introduction by Justin Roberts draws the Showstopper through a curtain, down a mini-ramp and into the ring. Meanwhile, the lyrics of his widely recognized song haul in charging crowds from all sides of the venue to see Michaels. A brief pause in between HBK's responses

permits a front-row outcry, “We love you, Shawn!” The humbled (former) competitor is soon overwhelmed by a vigorous “One more match!” chant.

“I came back for one more match in 2002,” Shawn lightheartedly retorts, “and that was nine years ago. I don’t think I have another nine in me.”

The crowd disagrees. Their attention, however, is diverted across the venue to a booth where Michaels’s best friend, Triple H, acknowledges his buddy with a symbolic cross-armed DX signal.

31

TWO WORDS: SIGN IT!, 10:37 a.m.

Hours before The Game will have the distinguished honor of inducting his greatest friend, the King of Kings rests atop a different type of elevated seat at *Axxess,* one with a snaking line of eager WWE fans waiting to meet Triple H. Who's suddenly cutting in line? The Showstopper.

Years and years of a friendship that's more like a brotherhood are very apparent in their exchange. Michaels forces The Game to scribble his "H" trifecta on an autograph sheet—further personalized with a "S*CK IT!

Shawn!”—then HBK hurls himself at his longtime ally for an exaggerated hug.

32

COMMON BOND, 10:44 a.m.

At the base of Triple H's autograph station sits a strong-willed Floridian named Robin Dismuke, with her DX-green wheelchair parked and ready to meet Shawn Michaels.

Robin grips a copy of Michaels's book, *Heartbreak & Triumph,* which HBK personalizes for her on the spot before slinging his arm around her for an intimate conversation. A few quick minutes will motivate Robin for miles.

“He’s the Showstopper, and you can tell he really cares about his fans,” she explains.“I was a surfer for twenty years until my injury, and I live by God, positive energy and a sense of humor. HBK has got that G-O-D in him and that’s what I like.”

“It’s a good code to live by,” she’s told by Michaels, a model example of this philosophy.

33

(HEARTS OF) GOLDEN TICKET, 11:11 a.m.

Just a little past eleven o'clock, Shawn Michaels rides away from the bustle of *WrestleMania Axxess* on one of its most crowded days. HBK just met hundreds of awestruck Showstopper fans, but the tempo changes when he shakes hands with Dantee and Damaris Benton.

The winners of HBK's personal raffle and his special guests at *WrestleMania XXVII* in Atlanta, the couple earned their trip over countless others for the chance to sit down and share a very intimate, uninterrupted meet-and-greet session with the Showstopper. The small talk is not unlike

that of friends catching up, simply due to Shawn's impeccably easygoing attitude and the pleasant manner of Damaris and Dantee, a member of the U.S. Marine Corps stationed in Quantico, Virginia.

For good reason, the couple encourage HBK to enjoy his big night and express their intent to participate in next year's raffle, which benefits three very special causes: Ronald McDonald House Charities, Operation Homefront and Cross Trail Outfitters.

One last set of photos flash and Shawn reaches into his pocket for his cell phone, to read a message from another very special guest who's here in Atlanta just for this momentous night in Michaels's life.

34

LOOK WOOOOO'S HERE, 12:01 p.m.

HBK is killing time, waiting for the dearest of friends, when the room lights up with the stylin', profilin' arrival of the Nature Boy, Ric Flair—a sight that's completely unexpected. Not seen on WWE turf since roughly three years ago, "Naitch" jet-flew to Atlanta for one reason: to watch Shawn Michaels join him in the WWE Hall of Fame.

Reminiscent of the tear-filled climax to their historic match at *WrestleMania XXIV,* the tenderness and mutual admiration between both

Michaels and Flair—two incomparable ring legends—evoke grins from anyone within a few feet.

Flair vows to watch Michaels's induction live tonight from inside the Philips Arena. The well-wishing culminates with the presentation of something special.

35

THE GIFT, 12:06 p.m.

Revealing a handheld wooden chest with Flair's face on the lid, the Nature Boy presents the Showstopper with a token to commemorate his grand achievement, representative of their unbreakable professional and personal bond. Michaels opens the box to find a glistening, one-of-a-kind belt buckle and matching accessories. It's a perfect gift for the "cowboy" who resides within HBK's Texas-size heart.

Mr. *WrestleMania* is moved and beyond touched by the gesture, but more so just elated by his friend's presence. A handshake turned strong embrace

exposes Flair's wrist, which bears a diamond-coated Rolex watch that's identical to the one worn by HBK. According to Michaels, these treasures have been on their wrists since the night of *WrestleMania XXIV,* mere moments after their epic clash. A gift from Shawn, who defeated Flair that night and retired him from WWE, the timepieces each bear a glistening "24" on their faces. They also have equally meaningful inscriptions: Flair's is engraved "To be The Man," and Michaels's bears the statement's completion, "You've gotta beat The Man."

This afternoon, Ric has reciprocated the thoughtfulness reverentially shown to him by HBK in 2008.

"You know what I was going to put on the back of the buckle, but it wouldn't fit?" Flair says. " 'Being The Man and staying The Man are two different things,' " he jokes with an explosion of laughter.

The men share yet another hug and a humbled HBK makes plans to see "Naitch" later this evening, at which point Michaels, too, will be wearing the ring of an honored WWE Hall of Famer.

36

IT'S "HALL"-MOST TIME, 3:14 p.m.

Around the corner from some heavy foot traffic near the gathering area for Hall of Fame inductees, a refreshed Shawn Michaels is treated to some last-minute mane primping prior to departing for Philips Arena, the site of tonight's induction ceremony, just twenty-four hours before *WrestleMania XXVII*.

"I'm more nervous now than I've ever been," Michaels admits, in a much more anxious state than earlier in the week. He's anything but verbose and much more reserved than he's been in days. It's sinking in.

37

McMAHON TO MAN, 4:44 p.m.

“If you have to cry, by all means cry. Don’t worry about it.” These are the words spoken by the WWE Chairman, Vince McMahon, in an address to Shawn Michaels and all WWE Hall of Fame inductees, hours prior to their individual immortalization onstage. McMahon, who’s known for his maniacal tenor when it comes to his signature exclamation, “You’re FIRED,” has a much less guttural gusto when he delivers his proud, compassionate talk-through of the evening.

“He mentioned crying because he knows I’ll probably cry,” Shawn states after a post-meeting, one-on-one run-in with his longtime boss, who’s been in both HBK’s corner and across the ring as his opposition at separate times over the years.

“Of course you’ll cry, why wouldn’t you? You were the absolute best at doing this job and you have every reason to cry,” McMahon tells HBK. “Enjoy your night. I want you to remember this forever.”

Their brief exchange ends with the tender encouragement bestowed by McMahon, who invites HBK to visit the CEO’s in-arena office for one final chat later on, just before showtime.

38

“KLIQ” HERE, 5:24 p.m.

Just when Shawn Michaels’s anxiety reaches its peak, he peers down the deep corridor in the alcove of Philips Arena to see a large, hulking individual moving in his direction. A grin instantly grows on HBK’s face at the sight of his seven-foot friend, Diesel (Kevin Nash). Not too far behind is Sean Waltman, or, as Michaels repeatedly refers to him, “Kid.” At last, the final piece for this scene arrives as a finely suited Triple H approaches his time-tested circle of friends.

They are the Kliq. And in the center of Atlanta on the eve of *WrestleMania,* they have reunited.

Brotherly embraces, conversations only they would understand, jokes about fanny packs and ensuing guffaws tell the tale of WWE's most notorious locker-room crew. The Game, X-Pac (a.k.a. 1-2-3 Kid or just "Kid") and the ever-towering Diesel engulf their celebrated comrade and pose for a snapshot, throwing up their trademark insignia. Call them a pack, though tonight, they're more appropriately a pride.

"When I found out that Shawn was being inducted, it brought tears to my eyes. . . . We'd been through so much over the years," says Waltman. "I get goosebumps talking about [our reunion today]," he continues, pausing to look at his arm while tears well up. "Today brought back a lot of memories. It was like we all saw each other yesterday."

Waltman concludes, "I'm just really grateful to be here and to be a part of this. I couldn't be happier for Shawn. Nobody deserves it more than he does. He's a wonderful human being and a tremendous friend."

39

“BIG DADDY COOL,” 5:49 p.m.

In the mid-1990s, there was perhaps no squared circle friendship as tightly knit as that of the Kliq, a group of backstage bros in Michaels, Triple H, Waltman, Scott Hall (a.k.a. Razor Ramon) and, of course, the biggest of them all: Kevin Nash.

Riding from state to state and flying around the globe, these men traveled and lived together, forging a family not of blood but rather a rare mix of shared sweat, tears and innate kinship. Together, the Kliq lived a personal

pact that's been time-tested all the way to the present day in Atlanta—ironically, the home of WCW, where Nash, Hall and Waltman were once whisked away from their peers who fulfilled their decorated careers in WWE. So many years later, Nash stands tall—characteristic of the seven-footer—beside his friends for the induction of a man who helped establish Diesel as a World Champion competitor in his own right.

"It kind of puts it into perspective—when one of your guys is going into the Hall of Fame. It's like 'Wow, we really are old-timers,' " bellows "Big Daddy Cool," Kevin Nash. "The guy that brought me here is going into the Hall of Fame tonight. Shawn's one of my best friends. Tonight's a fitting end to an unbelievable career.

"Going out there later tonight, I'm just glad that this time it won't cost Hunter three years of being in the doghouse," laughs the pithy big man, referring to the last time the group stood together in WWE.

Just like in their first days as comrades-in-arms, Nash will strut out behind HBK and make a truly rare WWE appearance—indicative of the historic moment on the verge of being realized.

"I've always said Shawn was the Michael Jordan of wrestling," Nash says. "There wasn't anything before him and there won't be anything like him after."

40

MEETING WITH THE BOSS, 6:09 p.m.

Away from his Kliq cohorts, HBK heads for the private room reserved for WWE's Chairman, Vince McMahon. After more than twenty years in the employ of the entertainment mastermind and an abundance of cherished (and contentious) moments, Shawn Michaels has no reservations about knocking on the door of the boss.

Inside the office of the man Michaels once clashed with on the Grandest Stage of Them All in 2006, HBK levels with the CEO, and after years of loyalty and impeccable performances at the spectacle McMahon devised, the

esteem flows equally in both directions. More important, Shawn expresses his sincerest gratitude for the opportunity McMahon gave him to once again share a moment with his closest friends, the Kliq.

The Chairman—in between a multitude of *'Mania* week loose ends—puts all business on hold to focus on Shawn, and he strongly encourages the notably restless HBK to truly enjoy his night and embrace each emotion that comes with it. As far as McMahon is concerned, tonight's commemoration (and much more) is well deserved.

"I'm very happy about the relationship I have with Vince McMahon," Michaels asserts after their encounter. "I drove him crazy for many years, but over that time, he and I grew very close. He knows the real me and I know the real him . . . he truly understands the validation I've gotten from this job and my career."

41

RING MASTER, 6:45 p.m.

Along with fellow inductees including Road Warrior Animal and "Hacksaw" Jim Duggan, Shawn Michaels is summoned for a moment he's been anxiously awaiting. HBK enters an undisturbed room that bears a table with a perfectly lined row of WWE logo–emblazoned Hall of Fame class rings.

In full tuxedo with tattoos that peek out from the sleeves each time he fretfully adjusts his hair, the Showstopper scans the perimeter and describes his gut feeling to a room full of camera crew members.

"In twenty years, you guys never made me nervous," he discloses. "*Now,* I'm nervous. It's a little too real for me."

With that, the WWE Chairman enters the room for Michaels's personal, one-on-one ring ceremony. Already affected by the weight of the scenario, McMahon gnaws back a clear swell of sentiment and simply tells Shawn, "Thank you."

Camera flashes and bright lights further illuminate the poignant moment between individuals sharing a bond much richer than employee-employer, much deeper than friendship. During such a symbolic moment, their complex relationship expresses itself in a powerful hug and emotion-reddened eyes. The gold ring is slipped on, and its snugness alleviates the breath-holding moment as Shawn charmingly states, "Okay, I'm going to go find my wife and kids and cry some more."

42

SHOOT INTERVIEW, 7:35 p.m.

Mr. *WrestleMania* is terribly close to taking the stage, and all he wants to do is see his family. On the hunt for his kin—for once, sans camo—Shawn finds Game all right, though just not the wild variety.

As if on a McMahon family marathon, HBK stumbles into Triple H and receives yet another shimmering gift that coincidentally matches the belt buckle given to him nearly eight hours earlier by Ric Flair.

"It's so beautiful," exclaims Michaels while opening a very personal token from his friend. "You know you're a redneck when your best buddy gives

you a revolver as a sentimental gift."

His levity aside, the Showstopper is captivated by the Colt .45-caliber revolver he's holding. HBK examines every aspect, from its sterling-silver body to the ivory hilt. For a recreational hunter like Michaels, this rare, never-been-fired classic firearm is genuinely meaningful and will find a suitably special place in his home.

43

LOST AND FOUND, 7:51 p.m.

Even with the pistol in his possession, the bravado begins to evaporate when HBK realizes his family is still absent from what's about to be the most triumphant night in his career. Out through the curtain, the arena is near its largest capacity—filled with WWE fans, Legends and Superstars, even his parents and siblings—but three people are missing. In his search, dips in and out of various rooms in the locker-room area are of no luck for Shawn. But then, one last hall peek reconnects the HB Clan, each of whom is fashionably attired, perfectly outfitted for their patriarch's event. This is

exactly what Michaels needed: a curiosity-piqued Cameron, sweet talk from Cheyenne and, finally, some sugar from the lips of his radiant wife, Rebecca.

A contented HBK escorts them to the porthole that leads out to their Philips Arena seats, which happen to be within earshot of WWE Champion The Miz, John Cena and countless others who hope to have careers as astounding as the Showstopper's.

44

ARE YOU READY?, 10:13 p.m.

With his wife and children seated out on the arena floor, Shawn soon starts to feel the effects of his family's absence again as it draws perilously nearer to his time. Michaels moves from available room to room in the Philips Arena locker room, pacing and fidgeting with his fingers, twisting and turning the new symbol of excellence on his right ring finger.

Drew Carey wraps up when Michaels is again joined by the Kliq, this time all in dapper tuxes. The foursome feel the immensity of the moment and express their time-tested affinity with few words, only a symbolic hand

gesture that connects all of their hands, like a secret handshake for their exclusive club.

Michaels waits to cross through the curtain, and X-Pac empties a tissue box while watching the video compilation of HBK highlights. A moment later and the Cerebral Assassin takes the stage, putting Shawn in his crosshairs for several minutes in a roast of sorts.

The mood loosens up substantially when Shawn's so-called googly eyes and infamous boot-tucked blue jeans farmer overalls are mocked onstage by The Game, Michaels's "road wife."

45

MR. HALL OF FAME, 10:32 p.m.

At last, the Showstopper takes a deep breath as the Cerebral Assassin ceases fire and warmly invites his best friend out for his official induction. “Mr. Hall of Fame” hits the stage and steps into an enveloping haze of camera flashes at the podium. The charisma kicks in, perhaps as a defense mechanism for lingering nerves, and HBK has the crowd chuckling in between “Thank you, Shawn” chants.

“I can say I’m going into the Hall of Fame with no regrets,” a reflective Michaels reveals, attributing his successes to his parents, God, the WWE

Universe and his family, who are just about twenty-five feet ahead to his lower right side.

No matter who fills the remaining seats in front of him—even some men who've tried their best in some of Shawn's most grueling bouts to ensure that this moment didn't happen—they gaze in admiration at an incomparable performer. They are all part of the fraternity to which Michaels is proud to have belonged for so long.

HBK is so appreciative and humbled by a night where the marquee moment is a celebration of the Showstopper, the Main Event. And though it seems like an impossibility to suitably cover the grounds of twenty-six years inside the squared circle, as always, Shawn delivers.

46

CURTAIN CALL, 10:49 p.m.

The Showstopper completes the rite of a WWE Hall of Famer and makes history in the Philips Arena. A center-stage squeeze shared by DX's founding members is embellished when the two direct the crowd's attention to the entrance of both Sean Waltman and "Big Daddy Cool," Diesel. An impressive ovation somehow rises in volume as the Kliq re-forms on WWE television for the first time since 1996.

How it began, it concludes. It's a befitting scene, since HBK's earliest rise in WWE was beside these men; and now that Michaels arguably cannot

climb any higher in the mythos of sports entertainment, the Kliq can share their friend's feeling of triumph.

This stage has borne something perfectly special tonight. This evening of April 2, 2011, has defined the legacy of the Showstopper and been a veritable aligning of several moons that HBK will perpetually cherish and none will soon forget.

DAY FOUR: Sunday, April 3, 2011

47

THE SHOW DOPPELGANGER, 10:39 a.m.

It's just about twelve hours since standing onstage as the latest addition to WWE's venerable Hall of Fame, and HBK has the same swagger to his step that he did prior to induction . . . save for the final, unnerving moments before his speech.

Finally relieved of the mounting stress from his grand moment, Shawn Michaels says he initiated a new day by allowing the previous night's events to truly sink in.

"I looked at my ring, I looked at the gift that Hunter got me, then I got to reflect on all the nice things that people said about me," HBK explains. "I've never seen more grown men cry than I did last night. I was touched by the fact that it was an emotional moment for so many other guys."

His emotions are far more balanced now, just in time for a VIP signing at *WrestleMania Axxess,* where a costumed Doppelganger HBK is waiting to meet his Showstopping idol. Having traveled eight hundred miles to Atlanta, Randy Latza manages to stand out among some very colorful WWE Universe members. Latza accessorizes his makeshift black leather studded chaps with his scarlet sunglasses and matching teardrop earrings—both heart shaped. The only person more excited than the Pennsylvania native is Michaels, who is thrilled at the sight and eagerly kicks into his signature HBK pose. Make that two.

"I've been watching Shawn since his AWA days, and I knew that he was going into the Hall of Fame, so I said let's do this right," Latza says. "This is a day I'll never forget for the rest of my life."

48

“ETERNAL LIFE,” 12:33 p.m.

It wouldn’t be the Show of Shows without Mr. *WrestleMania*. Even in retirement and, now, with ownership of a ruby-emblazoned Hall of Fame ring, nothing will keep Shawn Michaels away from the Grandest Stage of Them All. Reminiscent, the Showstopper recounts some of the clashes he witnessed in awe as a rising star in the WWE cosmos.

“I always go back to the Randy Savage–Ricky Steamboat match at *WrestleMania III*; it was the all-around best match on the card with two guys who are my preference of style and pace,” HBK explains.

In complete contrast to his all-time favorite clash, Michaels adds the aptly dubbed "Ultimate Challenge" between Hulk Hogan and the Ultimate Warrior in 1990 to his *'Mania* list. That same night in Toronto, The Heartbreak Kid and partner Marty Jannetty tussled with The Orient Express. Though defeated, Michaels fondly remembers an even larger moment for him as a spectator watching the epic confrontation from the other side of the curtain.

"You just knew something big was going to happen," he explains. "At the beginning of that match with the staredown between the two, you could feel the electricity in the building and get caught up in it."

Michaels continues: "Between those two moments—one watching as a fan, not part of the company, and then one being in WWE—I was starting to get a real understanding of what *WrestleMania* is."

For every memory he himself cherishes of the most iconic Superstars performing at *WrestleMania,* HBK has etched countless unforgettable moments in the minds and hearts of many competing tonight in Atlanta. And if all works out as planned on the Grandest Stage of Them All, they too will climb to the zenith of sports entertainment, a nook that Shawn Michaels has personally carved.

"With *WrestleMania,* there's this feeling that you can create a long-lasting piece of history," HBK divulges. "Chris Jericho once said that it's 'eternal life,' something that lives on forever. It's true. Memories you create at *WrestleMania* have the ability to last forever."

49

AUSTIN EMPOWERS, 1:01 p.m.

Thirteen years back, Shawn Michaels competed in what he'd thought was his final match ever. The world knows now that this wasn't the case. And maybe, just maybe, his opponent that night at *WrestleMania XIV* knew that HBK might one day return. But that clash isn't a topic of discussion between Michaels and Stone Cold Steve Austin this afternoon inside the Georgia Dome, home of this year's Show of Shows.

The pair of wily Texans converge at ringside while a handful of *WrestleMania XXVII* competitors—John Cena and Big Show among them—

chill under the domed roof overhead, discussing testosterone-heavy topics like hunting, crossbows and all things Texas.

"You knocked it out of the park," Austin tells HBK following Michaels's poignant address at the WWE Hall of Fame ceremony the previous night. The encouragement continues to pour in Shawn's direction this weekend.

Although this evening boasts a card of some still fairly fresh WWE faces, there is also this significant presence of the past. A sizable chunk of that history lies in The Attitude Era, the champions of which are conversing right now at this moment. In 1998, the D-Generation X and Austin 3:16 movements permanently altered the landscape of sports entertainment. Years later, these instrumental personalities stand, matured face to matured face, and exchange pleasantries mere feet away from a torchbearer of today's generation of Superstars in Cena.

50

TALKING THE WALK, 3:32 p.m.

There is ample speculation attached to Shawn Michaels's presence at *WrestleMania* tonight. Sure, the Showstopper vowed to stay in retirement this time last year. He even spent an entire week refuting the WWE Universe's pleas for one more match. Still, his comments linger from last Monday's *Raw,* in which he boldly doubted that his best friend, Triple H, could conquer the Phenom on the Grandest Stage of Them All. Many wonder if HBK could actually live with the fact if The Game were to do what Michaels couldn't in two attempts: sever Undertaker's undefeated streak.

As if purposely trekking down a ramp designed for him, Mr. *WrestleMania* steps down the colorfully decorated aisle—like many memorable times before—from the mouth of the grand stage back toward its base. True to form, Michaels buddies up with a longtime WWE crew member, who extends a congratulatory greeting to the Showstopper. Shawn lingers around the ringside area, up and down the ramp, thanking even more Superstars, production staff and others who continue to applaud his poise at Philips Arena.

As he stands at the epicenter of *WrestleMania XXVII,* many thoughts must race through the brain of the Main Event, who's since moved over for different combatants to fill that role.

51

THE SET FOR ACTION, 3:43 p.m.

Lights, cameras and readiness for action engulf Shawn Michaels while he does a near-full 360-degree spin to absorb the impeccably meticulous detail of the vast *WrestleMania XXVII* set. From the archlike *WrestleMania* sign over the entrance ramp with letters easily twice the height of Big Show to a glimmering LED-lit cube floating above the ring itself, the visual spectacle of this immense event brings even the Showstopper to a contemplative halt. In the middle of the Georgia Dome, Michaels pauses to recollect similarly

grand stages upon which he himself has danced, as well as his entrances to those unmatched performances.

"When I think of all the *WrestleMania*s, it's [*WrestleMania*] XXV with me and 'Taker that sticks out," Michaels attests. "For my entrance, being up on that platform had the subliminal messages of me descending from heaven with the contrast of Undertaker coming out—the light and the darkness."

He adds, "Up there, looking down and taking a peek—it was pretty amazing. High up there physically, you feel like you're larger than life on top of this sea of 75,000 people. It's overwhelming."

The symbolism of his and his opponents' arrival at the twenty-fifth anniversary of *WrestleMania* aside, HBK is quick to leap back in time to 1996 and his zipline descent from the Arrowhead Pond's rafters to his Iron Man match of destiny. The WWE Universe was relieved to see the white leather–bedecked Superstar safely land and fulfill such a daredevilish act just prior to a WWE Championship bout with Bret Hart. The Heartbreak Kid remembers a different feeling of relief himself.

"[At *WrestleMania XII,*] I was strapped in, ready to go down for an hour-long match, and all of a sudden, I had to go to the bathroom," Michaels reveals. "One thing I've always had to do is take one last pee break, and here I was at the top of the arena. So I went into the corner at the top and relieved myself. Only me and one other guy up there knew that happened."

52

PREACHING THROUGH THE CHOIR, 4:40 p.m.

It's an unorthodox visual to see HBK loosely perusing a *WrestleMania* stadium like your typical member of the WWE Universe, which, frankly, he's always been.

During a rehearsal session involving a throng of gospel singers, Shawn checks in with his Flip camera to record a message for visitors to his website. According to Michaels, following the vocal rendition of John Cena's theme song, he is perfectly content being a spectator today.

"Sometime before this event, I told everybody that I was Mr. *WrestleMania,*" HBK explains, "the guy you were going to remember when this show was over. Tonight, I'm ready to go out there and wave and that's about it."

He's danced on this stage so many times and, for many, this "*WrestleMania* air" would cause a relapse in the desire to dance again.

"I'm excited to just watch," Michaels reaffirms. "And right now, no, there's no itch. I'm allowed to be a part of this as much as I want, and you see how much I'm a part of it. That's how much I want. If I had the itch, I'd still be in there."

53

ALL ACCESS, 7:13 p.m.

Not just anyone can sit in one of the cushy, swiveling seats just waiting on the other side of the curtain. But with twenty-six years and an unrivaled match library, the Showstopper has more than earned his pass. Shawn pulls up to an unoccupied space beside WWE executive vice president Stephanie McMahon in what's essentially her road office . . . that just so happens to adjoin with that of her father, Vincent Kennedy McMahon. In formal attire for the WWE Hall of Fame inductee presentation later this evening, Shawn

employs his usual charm and wit to offer brief relief for his good friend in the middle of production for the biggest show of the year.

54

STAGE PRESENCE, 8:42 p.m.

For one last time, a tuxedo-garbed Shawn Michaels steps onstage during this unforgettable weekend, a good portion of which rightfully commemorated an iconic Superstar with indelible talent. Beckoned by the legendary voice of Howard Finkel to stand in the center of a five-pointed star on the red carpet adorning the stage, Shawn mentally captures this event in which 71,617 people express their gratitude to him. And it's reciprocated.

"[My faith] has put me in a permanent state of thankfulness," HBK states. "It humbled me in a huge way and brought a peace and a joy that I didn't

have before. It also got me in touch with the fact that I'm here for something, and that wrestling is just a part of it."

Although wrestling is a large part of his life, the lion's share is sitting in the skyboxes over the Georgia Dome floor.

55

BRINGIN' IT UP, 8:51 p.m.

Departing the stage an instant before the unlikely *WrestleMania* contest between Michael Cole and Jerry Lawler, Shawn Michaels is already disrobing in order to change into his more comfortable attire: cutoff button-down shirt and, since he is a proud Texan, his cowboy hat. HBK opens the door of a private locker room to find *WrestleMania* host Dwayne The Rock Johnson electrifying a very small audience. Close quarters serendipitously force a professional encounter between "The Great One" and the Showstopper that skews more personal. Their first meeting all weekend—

and in years, for that matter—provides Johnson with an opportunity to ask Shawn about retirement.

"Fishing, hunting, going to get Cold Stone [Creamery] ice cream," Michaels says, describing his favorite "kid-in-him" activities as a ring retiree. "Honestly, the biggest thing is having treat night any time we want and not having to wait till the Pay-Per-View's over and Daddy's home from *Raw*."

56

PUT INTO PERSPECTIVE, 9:11 p.m.

On his way to the skybox area where his family awaits him, Shawn Michaels grins as he meets *WrestleMania* celebrity Pee-wee Herman. HBK continues on his big adventure up to suite B90, where Rebecca, Cheyenne, Cameron and more than a dozen family members are watching history being made in the Georgia Dome. This includes his seated father, who closely watches Shawn's plainly refreshing interaction with eleven-year-old Cameron, bedecked in head-to-toe John Cena gear.

"[This weekend] has been a confirmation of my feeling that [Shawn] is the greatest entertainer WWE has ever had," passionately states HBK's father, who took out a loan nearly thirty years ago so that the Showstopper could be trained under Jose Lothario. "Of course it was worth it. It gave him the opportunity to pursue his vision of the future."

The love expressed appears to be genetic in its trickling from HBK's dad down through Michaels to Cheyenne and Cameron, much like "the Colonel" (as Shawn has affectionately referred to his father) has done in raising four children.

Concluding his thoughts, Michaels's dad rises to his feet just in time to see an epic arrival of WWE's greatest warriors. Undertaker. Triple H. No Holds Barred.

57

PHENOM TAKES FRIEND, 9:32 p.m.

A strong majority of the skybox is in staunch support of The Game for his joust with the spirit who claimed victories over HBK at two consecutive *WrestleMania*s. The most fervent favorers of Triple H are Michaels's loyal children, who expressed their wish "to see the streak end" earlier this morning at *WrestleMania Axxess*.

The rugged battle rages on and Shawn descends the stairs for a closer, unimpeded look at his best friend's clash with the only demon HBK couldn't

overcome. Michaels watches his chum struggle to take down the Dead Man, despite multiple Pedigrees, steel chair swings and even a Tombstone.

Hell's Gate, however, locks The Game in a realm of unenviable torment until Shawn's prophecy is fulfilled. Symbolically watching *WrestleMania* from a further distance than he has in years, HBK witnesses his friend fall to Undertaker as the tally reaches 19–0.

58

TWO FRIENDS FOR YA, 10:08 p.m.

The arena is still recovering from a frenzied exhibition, and the lyrics of Johnny Cash's ominous hymn continue to reverberate throughout the Georgia Dome.

Shawn Michaels was right. And so is Cash when it comes to Undertaker. Perhaps there is no grave that can hold his body down. Fortunately for the fallen Triple H, there's also no force in the world—supernatural or not—that can keep the Showstopper from his friend of fifteen years tonight.

The collision of "two old war-horses," as Michaels describes it, has come and gone and left considerable damage in its strife-ridden path. But still, there is a sanctity that restores The Game when he reconnects with his comrade, HBK.

Kevin Nash, Sean Waltman, Ric Flair, Stone Cold Steve Austin, The Rock. Each man has played an integral part in the creation of the Showstopper, but none more so than the Cerebral Assassin, who shares with Shawn a history far richer and extensive than some careers in WWE today. Like blood-tied brethren, they carve another memory among so many other milestones—a good deal of them celebrated over the course of *WrestleMania* week.

Together, they stand in The Game's dark hour, ironically among Michaels's brightest days. The events of WWE's greatest spectacle and a nightmarish, indestructible creature have brought Triple H—defeated by Undertaker—and Shawn Michaels—conversely radiant as newly christened WWE Hall of Fame inductee—even closer together tonight.

They are two men who have so greatly affected sports entertainment both separately and collectively. There is no plummet too steep or accolade too rich that can come between them. For all his championships and credits, Michaels falls back on faith, family and friendship, all of which have only been strengthened by the squared circle.

These past few days bear evidence that the dreams HBK once envisioned as a young boy in San Antonio have not only been fulfilled, but also unmistakably surpassed. And, after the performance given by his best friend and his gravest challenge live at *WrestleMania XXVII,* the retired Showstopper steps away freely, finding solace in the realization that even in his absence, the show will go on.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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In expressing my gratitude, I must also acknowledge the people who were genuinely invested in seeing it succeed and my own fulfillment as its author. Praise and thanks to . . .

Rich Freeda, whose remarkable photography captured the poignancy of Shawn Michaels's defining moment during *WrestleMania* week. Rich's talent and sleep-deprived effort across four taxing yet professionally fulfilling days in Atlanta made this project (and many others) successful. No ham, no eggs. Pure class and a camera lens.

My mom (a.k.a. Chief), for permitting me to order countless Pay-Per-Views, many of which are cited in this Diary. Not to mention the boundless love and encouragement, plus one heinous trip to MSG in my Hulkamania-yellow sweatsuit in 1991. Chris, who, just before leaving, made sure he gave me the big, strong push in this direction; and Stacey, John and Anthony, who cheer me on like they do Undertaker.

Finally, my wife, Monika, for allowing me to leap around the country (and globe) in winded chase of a dream. *Kocham cię*.

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